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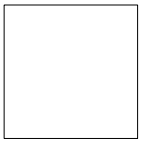

If Iran had bananas

Oil, Qanat, and the Continuity of the Hydraulic Power Structure in the Islamic Republic

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Abstract

This short article examines the relationship between natural resources and the resulting forms of political power in Iran, and by comparing water, oil, and the concept of the "banana republic," it shows how economic raw material can determine and shape political imagination and the structure of the state. Drawing on Karl Wittfogel's "hydraulic state" theory and the ethnographic data from Baba Abdad's dissertation, the article argues that in Iran's arid climate, the control of water and qanat networks has led to the formation of vertical and centralized power structures; a structure in which water is linked to legitimacy, the Shah, and the Sheikh.

The article suggests to the reader that in modern Iran, oil has reproduced many of the symbolic and political functions of water. Like water, oil is

extracted from underground, depends on centralized distribution networks, and enables the state's independence from society. From this perspective, the oil state can be seen as the modern continuation of the hydraulic logic of the qanat.

In conclusion, the article argues that the clergy's victory after the 1979 revolution should be understood not only on an ideological level but also in connection with the historical continuity of the vertical structure of power in Iran—a structure that extends from the qanat to the oil well.

Everything started with a game

"One may, in jest, famously even say the truth."[1]

— Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (1905)

"Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.[2] " Later, André Breton[3] André Breton turned this formula into one of the foundations of Surrealism, as it showed that meaning could be produced from the juxtaposition of unrelated elements.

On May 15, 2026, during one of the collective " " sessions at the Iranian Library of Stuttgart, an exercise in group creativity was held in which the

[1] "Quote from Sigmund Freud - In jest, one may famously even...," accessed May 16, 2026, https://www.buboquote.com/de/zitat/5036-freud-im-scherz-darf-man-bekanntlich-sogar-die-wahrheit-sagen.

[2] "Le Surréalisme (XXe Siècle) : Mouvement Littéraire," La Langue Française, July 4, 2023, https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/litterature/le-surrealisme.

[3] Breton, A. (1924). *Manifestes du surréalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

participants were divided into two groups: the first group had to propose an object, word, or concept, and the second group a problem, crisis, or social situation. Then the participants tried to establish a logical or metaphorical " " relationship between these two elements. The goal of the exercise was not to produce a correct answer but to reveal the mind's capacity to forge connections between apparently unrelated s.

This exercise can be considered a kind of "metaphor-generating machine" in which meaning arises not from the intrinsic similarity of objects but from the accidental or semi-accidental encounter of signifiers —a concept reminiscent of the surrealist notion of "chance" (*rencontre fortuite)* (and also the logic of the chain of signifiers in Lacan) (Breton, 1924[4] ; Lacan, 1966[5]).

This collaborative painting with Ahmad Eshaghian was based on the surrealist technique of , Cadavre Exquis; a method in which each person draws the continuation of the image without seeing the hidden part of the other's drawing.

On the other side of the folded paper (at the top of the image), a dragon had been drawn—something Ahmad had no way of seeing. Yet, on his side, a man appeared who, just like the dragon, was spitting fire and words from his mouth. How can two unseen images suddenly meet in a metaphorical correspondence? The Surrealists called this moment *rencontre fortuite*: a "chance encounter." But perhaps coincidence is never entirely random.

During this exercise, the combination of "banana" and "Islamic Republic" was raised—a pairing that at first glance seemed satirical and even absurd to . However, the continuation of th ic discussion gradually shaped the hypothesis that perhaps Iran's oil-based economic structure, politically and symbolically, has been more compatible with vertical, theological, and despotic structures than with horizontal forms of social organization and labor movements.

From this perspective, the question "What if Iran had bananas instead of oil?" is not a joke but a kind of thought experiment for understanding the relationship between geography, political imagination, and the form of the state.

The Banana Republic and the ical Question of the Economic

for

Chiquita; a name that is not just a reminder of bananas, but a part of Latin America's political history. The company, whose roots trace back to the United Fruit Company, years was the symbol of what would later be called the "banana republic": countries whose economies and even politics were shaped around the export of a single product and the influence of foreign companies. Coups, strikes, the repression of workers, and the link between capital and political power are part of this brand's history in Central and South America. From Guatemala to Honduras, the banana was not just a fruit; it was a geopolitical structure. Interestingly, in many of these countries, labor and leftist movements emerged precisely from this banana economy; a place where the body, labor, land, and the strike were still at the center of politics.

Perhaps this is why the "Banana Republic," with all its dependency and exploitation, produced a different kind of politics; a politics full of unions, streets, carnival, and insurrection. And now this question: If Iran had bananas instead of oil, would its political history have taken a different shape?

The term "Banana Republic" was first used to describe Latin American countries whose economies were dependent on the export of agricultural products—especially bananas—and controlled by the

ies of multinational corporations. In such structures, although the governments were legally independent, a large part of their economic and political organization was dependent on foreign al capital.

However, even in such dependent economies , production still depended on labor, land, networks of transportation, and social ization. As a result, class contradictions were experienced on an objective and everyday level. Many of Latin America's leftist and labor movements were formed precisely in the context of such economies.

"Banana Republic" is not just a political insult; it is a historical concept. A term once used to describe countries whose flags were still national, but whose economies and politics revolved around the export of a single commodity and dependence on foreign capital.

In this graffiti, the banana is placed right at the center of the flag, as if the flag itself has become a commodity. A fruit that should be part of nature is slowly replacing the symbol of sovereignty. Perhaps this image isn't just about Slovenia. Wherever the economy devours the political imagination, the flag will sooner or later become a product's logo. From oil to bananas, from the well to the farm, politics is often made of the same stuff that feeds everyday life. [Photo: By Stan Dalone - Banana Republic of Slovenia. Uploaded by sporti, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Qanat and the Vertical Structure of Power

In the ethnographic research "Baba Ab Dad[6] ," the relationship between water, legitimacy, and the power structure in the culture of the Iranian Plateau is examined. In this analysis, water is not merely a natural or economic element but becomes a symbolic structure in which water is linked to the sky, mercy, the king, and the sheikh, and, conversely, the earth is corresponded with the body, poverty, the peasantry, and the command of the .

In the text of the treatise, the relationship of the y of the king and the subject, as well as that of the sheikh and the disciple, is explained through the metaphor

[6] Iraj Esmaeilpour Ghoochani, "Bābā Āb Dād" (Text.PhDThesis, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2017), https://edoc.ub.uni-muenchen.de/21528/;

of the y of "fish and water" : the fish needs water to survive, but water has no need for the fish. This asymmetry creates a vertical structure and an ontological being in which life, legitimacy, and meaning flow from above or from a y transcendent source .

In Iran's arid climate, water has been the most important means of production and social survival. For this reason, control of irrigation networks and qanats has always been linked to the concentration of political power. Karl August Wittfogel explains this situation in terms of his "hydraulic despotism" theory, which posits that in societies where water control leads to bureaucratic centralization and political authority (Wittfogel, 1957).

However, in the context of Iran, the issue is not merely managerial or technical, but also relates to the symbolic structure of power. In the study "Baba Ab Dad," the qanat system and water distribution are analyzed not only as an economic tool but also as a model for the vertical organization of social reality and, consequently, the vertical configuration of the world (Esmaeilpour Ghoochani, 2017). In this analysis, water is linked to the sky, mercy, the Shah, and the Sheikh, while the earth is associated with the body, poverty, the peasantry, and obedience.

The text of the treatise calls this structure a kind of "vertical Manidoo system" (ibid., p. 129); a pattern that, unlike the horizontal totemic system, is based

on an asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship. Just as a fish needs water to survive, but water has no need for a fish, the disciple is dependent on the sheikh and the serf is dependent on the owner of the water. Thus, controlling water is not merely controlling a natural substance, but controlling the flow of legitimacy, life, and meaning.

Here, Kazem Alamdari's analysis also becomes important. Alamdari shows that in Iranian history, the concentration of power and "royal lawlessness" were linked to the landownership system and the Shah's claim as the "owner of all lands" have been linked (Alamdari, Preface page i, 2005). But in Iran's arid climate, land without water is of limited value; therefore, what has practically been the source of power is not merely the ownership of soil, but the control of the flow of water. Oil in modern Iran reproduces this same structure. Both water and oil: They are extracted from underground; they require a distribution network; and they enable the concentration of power.

But the main difference between the banana economy and the oil economy becomes apparent precisely at this point. In a banana-based economy, wealth is produced at the surface of the earth and through collective labor, social bodies, and horizontal relations. In contrast, in a petroleum economy, wealth is extracted from the "depths," and the state can reproduce itself without direct dependence on

social production. Therefore, the difference between bananas and petroleum is not just the difference between two commodities, but the difference between two forms of political imagination and two geometries of power: one horizontal and dependent on collective labor, and the other vertical and dependent on the control of an underground material flow.

In the banana economy, wealth is built from the surface and through collective labor; but in the oil economy, wealth is extracted from the "depth." This difference is not just economic, but it also transforms the nature of society's relationship with power.

The 1979 Revolution and the Failure of the Red and Black Alliance

The coalition of leftist forces and the clergy in the 1979 Revolution has often been described as a "red and black" alliance. However, this alliance was asymmetrical from the outset. The Iranian left was primarily based on concepts such as class, production, industry, and y of labor. In contrast, the Shiite clergy had for centuries operated s at the heart of vertical structures distributing legitimacy, mercy, and meaning. From this perspective, the Islamic Republic cannot be ed as merely the result of the of religion's return to politics; rather, it must be understood as the structural continuation of the same logic of hydraulic states, as Wittfogel termed

them, which had long existed ly in the qanat system and water distribution.

Conclusion

The ical hypothesis "If Iran Had Bananas" is an attempt to demonstrate the ical relationship between the material form of the economy and political imagination. A banana-based economy, despite dependency and exploitation, typically drives society toward more horizontal, forms of ization, because production depends on the bodies of social s and collective labor.

In contrast, the oil economy creates a vertical production structure , in which power derives from the control of the underground flow of material , the material that, like water in the qanat system, is linked to legitimacy, mercy, and political centrality .

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